

## **Science in the Service of Older Adults: Bridging the Gap<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT.** The successful solutions to many of the problems facing the older adult population center around the ability of the aged to use, evaluate, and understand the detailed and technical information available to them from a variety of areas. Currently, many disciplines are involved in investigating problems of older adults relative to neighborhoods, consumer product liability, housing needs, employment, assessment and diagnosis of potential client problems, discrimination and race relations, health, cultural effects, and public matters of assistance. Relative to these efforts, scientific and technical data are available concerning the establishment of formal and informal networks to effectively address these concerns. An associated problem confronting older adults is the confusion experienced when they attempt to assimilate the relevant scientific information available. The focus of this paper is the process for the successful use of this information by seniors and coping strategies for combating data shock.

OHIO J. SCI. 93 (3): 72-73, 1993

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Hudson and Danish (1980) concepts of personal and interpersonal problems caused by a lack of knowledge, a lack of skills, and/or inability to assess the risks have specific applications to aging individuals of this society. Programs, modeled from the Hudson and Danish concepts, are designed to help seniors cope with critical life events, and to teach the older learners the skills in the identification and acquisition of information required to resolve their problems. The work of Willis (1990) confirms the importance of cognitive training for aging persons. A secondary focus of the present paper is to illustrate the issues confronting aging individuals and to encourage scientists and service providers to investigate the complexities of information acquisition and utilization experienced by older adults. This is a bridge that is needed. The key concepts of this process are the following:

1. Goal assessment is defined as the ability of older adults to identify life goals.
2. Decision making is the process by which the courses of action necessary for goal achievement are identified and selected.
3. Risk assessment involves identifying and testing hypotheses.
4. Evaluation of the potential costs and benefits must be accomplished in pursuing a selected course of action.

Self development derived from acquiring these skills enables the older individuals to plan their own skill development program.

It is essential to teach the four problem-solving skills (goal assessment, decision making, risk assessment, and

evaluation of the potential costs and benefits) to older adults so that they may apply them to specific life events. In this manner the aging individual learns to confront such events. The assessment process incorporates the ability of the individual to identify barriers to the acquisition and utilization of information. Overcoming barriers is a common practice of scientists engaged in research, and has implications for the training of older adults in acquiring and using information skills. The examination of the linkage between older adults and their information needs is followed by presentation of the methods to develop resources to facilitate information acquisition. Emphasized in this process is the importance of the role of the scientist in the process of teaching older adults strategies and skills in gaining information, evaluating it, and implementing it to improve their quality of life.

### **Linkages and Scientists**

Obstacles stand between the older individuals and the available informational sources. The two major barriers are unfamiliarity of the older adult with potential informational sources and the jargons of the language of the scientific and service communities. Additionally, some agencies limit access to their services by establishing bureaucratic barriers that are discriminatory and humiliating to older adults attempting to acquire information.

The concepts of Birren and Woodruff (1973) and McClusky (1979) support the value of education/training strategies in helping older adults in overcoming and coping with contemporary situations and achieving self-actualization (Maslow 1954) by the acquisition of new knowledges and skills. The "need to know" is as fundamental in the maintenance of the "self" as Maslow's (1954) needs for belongingness and physical security (Sterns and Mitchell 1979). Seniors failing to acquire the necessary information do not find positive solutions to their problems and consequently fail. Under such conditions individual self-esteem is depressed and the posture of "learned helplessness" results (Seligman 1975). The linkage between individuals and their informational needs is of

<sup>1</sup>Manuscript received 9 April 1992 and in revised form 29 March 1993 (#92-12).

great importance in the older adult's ability to maintain a high level of life quality.

Older adult access to information varies by experience and/or education. The argument can be made that scientists are, by their professional orientation, inclined to be information seekers, to be exposed to the print media, to use more professional resources, and to know how to ask questions and not only seek answers. Therefore, scientists have the information acquiring skills to make an important contribution to older adults struggling to gain the information necessary to successfully confront the events of life.

### Identifying Resources for Information Acquisition

The informational needs of the aging are important to their personhoods (Sterns and Mitchell 1979) and will vary across a number of dimensions including age, physical condition, educational background, and chronological life experience (Neugarten and Danan 1973). Once the needs of the aging individual are established, he/she must determine the information resources available. Two categorical types of information resources, formal and informal, have been noted by Hudson and Danish (1980). The formal category includes libraries, Information and Referral (I & R) agencies, and newspapers, while the informal sources include the network of natural helpgivers such as family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and self-help community groups such as women resource centers. The church also functions as a resource among groups of the aging blacks and other minorities (Taylor and Chatters 1986; Lloyd et al., unpublished). When the informal and formal information are in agreement, the likelihood of the aging person obtaining useful information is increased. With disagreement between the information from the two categories, the older adult is required to carefully evaluate both.

### How to Gather Information

A four step process is recommended for gathering information (Hiemstra 1985): 1) identification of the information needs, 2) identification of the information sources, 3) recording and categorizing the various sources of information, and 4) updating the record of information sources to account for new and changing sources and needs as they arise. Within these steps, identifying needs is dependent upon the individual's goal assessment and recognition of the information needed to obtain these goals. Identifying sources of information involves pinpointing relevant formal and informal sources. In recording and categorizing, the record-keeping behaviors that scientists exhibit would be most useful to older adults.

### Bridging the Gap

Scientists' involvement in the development of the older learners would enhance their searching ability, information evaluation, and efficient use of information to meet their particular needs. This process must occur to facilitate in older learners the acquisition of necessary behaviors to assess their own information-seeking abilities. The success of this process advances the self-confidence.

The steps involved in acquiring information are:

1. Assessing information needs.
2. Planning the action-steps necessary to acquire information such as:
  - a. identifying information sources,
  - b. identifying behavior needed to acquire information,
  - c. assessing initial competence of the behavior, and
  - d. developing evaluation criteria for determining whether needs are met.
3. Implementing the necessary actions to acquire information.
4. Evaluating information in terms of stated goals.
5. Applying information acquisition skills to other information needs.

Some examples of major categories in the need for content analysis include:

Neighborhood—problems with neighbors, pets, and rats  
 Consumer—consumer protection  
 Health—problems with mental health

### SUMMARY

Individuals experiencing problems need the skills of an information analyst. The recognition of the legitimate role of the scientist in the discovery of successful solutions to the information acquisition and utilization dilemma is paramount to the evolution of successful aging in our society. This is the bridge that must be built.

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